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ABSTRACT

In a bilingual education program, reading should be introduced in the child's stronger language. Reading in the second language should be delayed until the child has become fully literate in the first language. Ideally that point should be determined for each child individually. The relative emphasis given to reading in each language is based on different factors, basically depending on language role. In the case of newly transcribed languages, the creation of a written literature should be encouraged. (VM)

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READING IN BILINGUAL EDUCATION

by

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There are several issues which have to be taken in consideration in planning the reading portion of a bilingual program. They include, among others, the language in which reading will be introduced, the emphasis given to reading in each of the languages once the children are reading in both, the finding or creation of reading materials appropriate to the levels of competency and interests of the children, and the purposes of the bilingual program itself.

Beginning Reading

Medium of Instruction

A number of years ago it was declared "axiomatic" by UNESCO that children should be taught to read in their mother tongue (UNESCO 1953). Subsequent research has further strengthened this position (Macnamara 1967, Modiano 1968, Orata 1953, Pryor 1968, Richardson 1968).

In the case of bilingual children who are first learning to read, this research makes it clear that the child should be taught to read in his stronger language; only those children whose mastery of both languages is so strong that they can fully comprehend the beginning reading materials can receive instruction in either language.

In any case, reading should be introduced in only one language; reading in the second language should be delayed until the child has become fully literate in the first. We should not confuse the problems of learning to read with the problems of learning a new language. Moreover, since no language is transcribed exactly like out unphonetic English, and the assumption here is that one of the two languages is English, differences in transcription will only serve to confuse the child. He should learn one method of transcription, and learn to decode it well, before he begins to untangle another. This is true even when the second language is transcribed in the ideographs or syllabaries, as is true for, among others, Chinese, Cherokee, and two of the systems of transcribing Japanese; or in a non-Roman alphabet such as Hebrew, Greek, or Arabic. The process of reading, regardless of the system of transcription, is universal (Gray 1956) and our first interest in introducing reading in the bilingual program is that the child learns to read. When we confuse the learning of a second language with the learning of reading we only succeed in confusing the child mightily, to the end that we retard his learning to read in either language (Modiano 1968) and often discourage him from academic achievement in any area.

Introduction of the Second Language

At some point it is appropriate to introduce reading in the second language. Exactly where this point occurs will depend upon

several factors, including how we define "able to read", the method of transcription of the language which the child has already learned to read, the availability of more advanced printed materials in the first language and possible political pressures from the community.

Reading in the second language should be delayed until the child has learned to read in the first. At what point does this happen? Ideally not until he reads with ease anything placed before him, showing us that he has internalized all the rules for decoding his language. For some languages this is easier to define than for others. For example, when we deal with a phonetically transcribed language such as Spanish (about 90 percent of our bilingual programs are Spanish-English) we should expect the child to read easily, smoothly, with no hesitations or halts to decode any but a highly complex new word. The same would be true for any other language whose transcription is regular, with almost no exceptions to the rules, including the languages transcribed with syllabaries. For a language like Hebrew the same would hold true if the vowel markings are present; in their absence the child should at least have no trouble with the consonants. If an ideographic transcription is being used, one would expect the child to be able to read at least several hundred characters and hopefully books intended for independent reading by children.

If the language the child can read uses a transcription system markedly different from English the requirement for "able to read" might be interpreted less stringently than for one whose transcription is very similar, since the child will be faced with learning a whole new set of decoding skills for English. But when the transcription is almost the same, as it is for most languages transcribed with the Roman alphabet, then the definition "able to read" should be adhered to rather strictly. The better able the child is to read his own language, the less trouble he will have in learning to read English, and the less he will confuse the decoding rules for the two languages. No grade placement for this point is given here because it will vary with each child, with each language, with each class and school. Ideally, the point should be interpreted for each child individually; at the least each school system should make the decision for itself.

Once it has been decided that the time has come to introduce reading in the second language, all similarities in transcription should be stressed. For almost all the bilingual programs in this country these greatly outweigh the differences. Assuming the second language to be English (and assuming that it has been taught orally since the child first entered the program so that it is no longer an unknown tongue for him at this point), the next step is to introduce all the regular differences between the orthographies, and give practice materials. For example, if the first language is Spanish, a good starting place, after telling the children that most of the letters have the same sounds in English and showing them a number of words which they can already read, differences in the values of j, th,

b, d, and h should be introduced, one at a time, and the children should be informed that the vowels will often vary from their Spanish pronunciation. Some people consider it advisable at this point to give the rules for the long and short vowels of English, thereby accoun ing for at least 10 of our vowel sounds. Since the children will be considerably older than six at this point, they may well be able to handle such abstract analysis. Others feel that so long as they know that the pronunciation of vowels is not terribly consistent they should rather be introduced to interesting but short reading materials and learn the rules as they go along, much as most children do when learning to read English as a first language. I tend to support the latter position, since it gives the child the opportunity to discover how much he knows earlier than if he first learns a whole series of rules. I would present the children with textual materials from the beginning and deal with each of the differences in orthography as it arises. Thus, the only instruction I would give to the children beforehand would be to warn them that the vowels might have different values in English and to hang loose, sounding out each word and using the pronunciation that makes most sense in the sentence. Of course this presupposes that the child already understands a goodly amount of English, including the material he is being asked to read. For bilingual programs in urban areas, or indeed, wherever the children receive a constant stream of English from the television at home and possibly also from playmates, this will have happened by the time the child is ready to begin reading in English. In more isolated regions, it might be well to use children's dictation, in English, for the first reading materials, in order to be certain that they know what it is they are reading. But even for the most isolated of populations, if the child has truly learned to read in his mother tongue enough time will have elapsed for him to have achieved at least some grasp of conversational English. Whatever the English he knows, that is the English he should begin to read.

For children whose mother tongue is transcribed very differently from English, and for children who have learned comparatively little of the second language because of their great isolation from the mainstream, the teacher may well want to begin much as she would with beginning readers. However, to her and the children's advantage, they will already know what reading is about and, unless they have learned to read ideographs, will already know how to analyze words into syllables and sounds.

Appropriate Emphasis on Reading in Each of the Languages

Once the children have begun to read in the second language the question arises concerning what emphasis should be given to reading in each of the two languages. This will vary, depending on the purposes of the bilingual program, whether or not both tongues are world languages, or if either of the languages has certain attributes which must be taken into consideration. Thus, if the second language is

French or Spanish, each with its great body of literature, the program might might well be designed to give both equal weight and some arrangement might be made, such as that of the Coral Way School in Miami, to teach all subjects in both languages. A possible organization other than Coral Way's might be, once the children have learned enough English, to teach each subject in just one language or the other, but to change the language of instruction periodically and so as to make sure that over the course of a year the child receives 50 percent of each subject in each language.

If the language other than English is a sacred language, such as Hebrew, the parochial nature of the curriculum might provide the answer as to how much emphasis should be given to each tongue. Since all parochial programs, to my knowledge, are designed so that the children achieve at least on a par with children in "the better" public schools, reading in English is not slighted.

If the mother tongue is a local language, spoken by a limited number of people and with a small body of written literature, as is true of many of our Indian languages, then the picture changes. The reality is that most tribes are first becoming concerned about creating a body of written literature. Often they lack the funds to do much more than wish, and look to the schools, with their fledgling scholars, to do the job. Indeed, the schools must if they are to provide any written materials for their students. However, the use of the written language will be limited. The reality of present funding policies is such that little will be produced besides "readers' Written material, at least from the middle elementary grades on, can be provided only in English. Therefore, the children, if they are to achieve academically, will have to build their English reading skills; this implies more emphasis given to reading in English than in the mother tongue once the children have learned to read in both. However, it does not imply that the children should be introduced to reading in English before they have learned to read well in their mother tongue; to do so would only mean that they would be almost as confused as if they were taught to read in English from the start.

Materials

Implicit in all the foregoing is the need for adequate materials for reading in the mother tongue. The scarcity, abundance, and appropriateness of the materials depends upon the language of which we are speaking.

Spanish

Spanish, the mother tongue in about 90 percent of our bilingual programs, is the world language spoken by more people on earth than any other, with the possible exception of English. There is a great wealth of materials available in Spanish both for initial instruction

in reading and for all the more advanced levels. Much of this can be inspected at the Text Book Library of the Pan American Union, here in Washington (3045 15th Street, N. W.). In selecting materials, teachers should be concerned with all the factors we take into consideration in selecting reading materials in the regular English program. Foremost among these is the appropriateness of the materials. Are there major linguistic differences between their Spanish and the children's dialect? Do they deal with matters of interest and concern to the children? Is the print appropriate in size? Do they introduce reading the way we feel, philosophically, it should be introduced? And finally, are the books attractive, durable, not overly expensive? But even before selecting materials and turning to books to help with reading instruction, we should decide how it is that we wish to introduce reading. Readiness exercises may or may not be appropriate; children's dictation almost always is the best material with which to begin reading instruction.

Many Spanish texts still introduce four alphabets simultaneously to the beginning reader: small and capital book print and small and capital script. However, texts can be found which follow the far more common North American practice of having the child learn to read just those letter forms which he also learns to write, namely, small and capital manuscript. It appears advisable that the texts chosen follow this practice.

Equally important, if not more so, is the need to choose books which deal with material of intrinsic concern to the children and which is couched in a language close to their spoken dialect. Many of our children speak neither Castillian or the prestige dialect of their parents' land. We will do them no more good than we do to Blacks if we treat their spoken language as bastardized sounds and insist that the "real" Spanish is that which the book contains.*

* Research by Gumperz (1969), among others, has shown that Spanish speakers along our southern border speak both Spanish and English, not an amalgam of the two as is sometimes assumed by those who disparage their way of speaking.

Other World Languages

More than adequate beginning reading materials are also available for the other world languages. The education ministries of the respective countries can often supply excellent materials or suggest appropriate sources. All the major countries where the language is spoken should be consulted. For example, it may well be that texts developed in Quebec are more appropriate for our French speaking children than those developed in Paris. By the same token, German materials from Austria, Bonn, and East Berlin should all be looked at before any are rejected, for either methodological or ideological reasons. The same holds true for materials in Chinese, where both Mainland and Taiwanese materials should be inspected. In this case the prejudices of the parents should also be taken into consideration.

Languages Newly Transcribed

Some of the languages of our bilingual programs have only recently been transcribed and lack a ready set of reading materials. This is as true for Romanized Chinese as it is for Navajo. However, the lack of materials need not deter a reading program. The first source of materials, and always the most important in any reading program regardless of the language, is the children's own dictation. Children can dictate and illustrate their stories individually (Ashton-Warner 1963, Aukerman 1971), or the group can dictate a class story. All these stories should be saved. Class stories should be reproduced for all of the children so that each has his own reader. Once the children can decode, the teacher should begin to write short stories for them, using old tales and sayings as well as classroom events for themes. All of these should be reproduced and saved. Once the children can begin to write independently, they should begin contributing to the collection. Not only would this help the individual teacher furnish materials for her class, but over time a fairly good collection of reading materials can be amassed. If printed on only half a page, room is left for the children to illustrate their texts. Recently some educators have been experimenting with the use of the camera to stimulate stories or to illustrate them.

Of course, this means the additional work for every teacher in collecting the stories, transcribing them, especially at the beginning stages, and often in reproducing them as well. Into the budget of every bilingual program for a newly transcribed language should go funds for personnel to help with the production of the reading materials.

Once the children have learned to read the program should not bridge entirely into English. Chinese or Japanese children may go on to read in the more standardized forms of their literature, but Indian children should be encouraged to continue the struggle to develop a body of written literature. They should transcribe the tales of their elders whether biographical or mythical, and suggest and help develop interesting contemporary stories. Not only will this help create the body of literature needed for a full reading program, but even more importantly, will help integrate the school into the lives of the children and their families.

Summary

Reading occupies a central place in bilingual education. In the case of world languages there is little question of this; it should be just as central with newly transcribed languages. The use of both languages should be continued throughout the program. In the case of world languages, reading and all other academic

subjects should be given in both languages. But regardless, reading should be introduced in the mother tongue only. In the case of newly transcribed languages, the creation of a written literature should be encouraged, among children, teachers, and parents alike; while it may be necessary to use written materials for the various academic materials in English, oral instruction can and should be given in both languages. It is only by giving both languages equal dignity that we can demonstrate our commitment to truly bilingual education.

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